



**De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of
Antonioni's China Film]**

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Yet, as Seyrig points out, it's "the only time that Jeanne ever took a stand, or expressed revolt in any way." It is the only decisive action she takes.

The emotional impact of *Jeanne Dielman* is very powerful because we are forced to experience it phenomenologically in an unusual way. We must adapt to its unconventional style by going through several stages. At first, the routines and rhythms seem strange, frustrating, or even comical. We wait for something dramatic to happen; we wonder when the pace will quicken or when the camera will move. Some people in the audience grow impatient and walk out, particularly those like Jeanne who cannot tolerate the new. Those who remain begin to realize that the entire film will move at this slow pace, that it is establishing new conventions. We alter our expectations, relax, and gradually become absorbed by the images and physically attuned to the rhythm. In many of the long takes, we can let our eyes wander freely within the frame, observing details that we would never notice in a more conventional movie; we have time to think about what is happening or not happening. Our participation becomes more active; we

begin to feel in control. Increasingly, we feel at home with the familiar shots and slow pace. Whereas earlier we welcomed any visitor or outdoor scene, eventually we come to resent them as intrusions. On the third day, we're glad to see the noisy baby leave and we're relieved when Jeanne shuts the door on the mother. We are vaguely upset by the acceleration of the pace and the minor deviations. We are very disturbed by the sex and violence, which many of us in the audience at first hoped for, but which we now experience as highly disruptive. Like Jeanne, we are relieved to return to the immobility of the final shot. Of course, when the film is over, unlike Jeanne, we are released from the trap; yet our own susceptibility to the routines and resistance to the new have been demonstrated. We have experienced the trap from the inside and, as a result, our own perception and consciousness have been expanded. The film makes us see our own daily routines in a new way; it leads us to re-examine the relationship between our identity and our actions. Most important, it makes us more receptive to what is new and liberating in our experience.

UMBERTO ECO

De interpretatione, or the difficulty of being Marco Polo

[On the occasion of Antonioni's *China* film]

What happened in Venice last Saturday fell somewhere between science fiction and comedy *all'Italiana* with a dash of western. In the wagon ring, desperately resisting, were Ripa di Meana and the Venice Biennial Exposition officials. Around them galloped Chinese diplomats, the Italian foreign minister, the Italian embassy in Peking, the Italian-Chinese Association, the police, firemen and other Sinophiles. The story is noteworthy: China

was protesting the imminent showing of Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo* at the Fenice. The Italian government had done everything possible to prevent the showing, the Venice Biennial Exposition had resisted in the name of the right to information and to artistic expression; at the last moment the Venetian prefect, coming to the aid of Peking, discovered that the Fenice was unusable as a movie hall (after having done nothing

but run films there for a week). Meana let leak at a press conference a few well-chosen words of "pity" for the prefect, "forced into such a vile business," and got on the phone to his colleagues. Within half an hour he freed the Olimpia movie house, where Barbra Streisand was fleeing pursued by a herd of cattle. Here the screening took place while police held an enormous, tense crowd at bay in such a way that no incident could give the prefect (their direct superior) the pretext to call off even this last expedient. Antonioni, nervous and troubled, was once again suffering his very personal and paradoxical drama—the anti-Fascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect and who found himself accused of being a Fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons.

Now the Biennial Exposition did with firmness and dignity what should have been done long ago: it gave us all the chance to see and re-see the three and a half hours of incriminated documentary, so that we can finally open a political and aesthetic debate around it.

What is Antonioni's *China*? Those who saw it on TV remember it as a work that manifested, from the start, an attitude of warm and cordial participation in the great event of the Chinese people; an act of justice on TV's part which finally revealed to millions of viewers a true China, human and peaceful outside of the western propagandistic schema. All the same, the Chinese have denounced this film as an inconceivable act of hostility, an insult to the Chinese people.

It had been said that Antonioni's film would be only a pretext, a *casus belli* chosen by a Peking power group to advance the anti-Confucian campaign. But even if that were true, the fact remains that a *casus belli*, to work, must be credible: a world war can be started because of the murder of an archduke, but not because of the murder of a footman. Where is the archduke in Antonioni's documentary?

It is necessary then to see the entire work from a different viewpoint: not from an Italian point of view, but from a Chinese point of view. This is not easy, since it amounts to activating all one's own anthropological antennae, alerted by the fact that words and images acquire different meanings ac-

cording to the cultures which interpret them. Saturday night I was favored by the fact that I could see the film while a young Chinese movie critic from Hong Kong—who saw and still sees this work rigidly and polemically, identifying himself with the values and culture of People's China—provided a shot by shot commentary on it.

Now it is certain that serious ideological objections can be advanced against Antonioni's work. A western artist, particularly inclined to plumb the depths of existential problems and to emphasize the representation of personal relationships rather than abstract dialectical problems and the class struggle, speaks to us about the daily life of the Chinese within the revolution rather than showing the revolution as the moment of a primary contradiction, within which poles of secondary contradiction open up. Furthermore, a director capable of speaking with masterly skill by stressing the inessential, the secondary episode charged with multiple meanings and subtle ambiguities, slips into a public remark the fact that he knows best great frontal oppositions, symbolic characterizations in clear ideological cipher. Here is enough to start a serious debate about the ends and means of revolutionary art, and it is not valid that Antonioni simply defend the rights (for us, uncontested) of his poetic vision, of his artistic eye's special interpretation; another aesthetic, as a given fact, opposes him, an aesthetic which seems to negate the rights of art, an aesthetic which in reality reaffirms them in a way that is foreign to western tradition. If this were all, a splendid chance for confrontation would have presented itself, and *China* would have become the basis for mass showings followed by political debate. Instead *China* unleashed an almost physical reaction, a violent and offended rejection.

And there is something more. The *China* question reminds us that when political debate and artistic representation involve different cultures on a worldwide scale, art and politics are also mediated by anthropology and thus by semiology. We cannot open a dialogue on identical class problems among different cultures if we do not first resolve the problem of symbolic superstructures through which different civilizations represent to themselves the same political and social problems.

What discourse did Antonioni address to the western public with his film? In a few words, I would say the following: "Here is an immense and unknown country that I can only look at, not explain in depth. I know that this country used to live in immensely unjust feudal conditions, and now I see the beginning, through daily struggle, of a new justice. To western eyes this justice might have the look of a diffuse, austere poverty. But this poverty establishes a possibility of dignified survival, it reinstates persons who are calm and much more human than we are, at times it comes close to our ideal of serenity, harmony with nature, affection in personal relationships, tenacious inventiveness which resolves with simplicity the problem of redistribution of wealth in an often greedy territory. I am not so much interested in seeing those cases where the Chinese were able to construct industries like western ones; we know that they even have the atomic bomb: but it seems to me more interesting to show you how they were able to construct a factory, or hospital, or child-care center from a few scraps, in working conditions based on reciprocal respect. I want to tell you how much sorrow and how much work that task cost, and suggest to you the measure of happiness—different from ours—that all that could encompass, perhaps also for us."

All this entailed the search for China as a potential utopia by the frenetic, neurotic West; and the use of categories which for us assume specific values, where when people say "*arte povera*" they mean a kind of art delivered from the frenzy of jargon required by the commercial gallery circuit, and when they say "*medicina povera*" they mean a medicine which substitutes the rediscovery of the relationship between human beings and herbs, and the possibility of a new, popular knowledge for the poisoning of our pharmaceutical industries. But what meaning can the same words have for a country where "poverty" meant, only a few decades ago, death by starvation for entire generations of children, class genocide, sickness, ignorance? And where the Chinese see a suddenly acquired collective "fortune," the film commentary speaks (in my opinion) about a serene and just "poverty." Where the film means "simplicity" for "poverty," the Chinese viewer reads "*miseria*" and failure. When his Chinese escorts told Antonioni, with

pride, that a refinery had been built from nothing, using scavenged material, the film emphasizes the miracle of "this humble factory, made with discarded materials"—and western taste for the ingeniousness of *bricolage*, to which we currently attribute aesthetic value, is at play in this linguistic formula. But the Chinese see in it an insistence on an "inferior" industry, just at the historical moment in which they are successfully closing their industrial gap. When the film celebrates, today, fealty to the past and proposes a model of integration between development and tradition, the Chinese (engaged in a struggle to destroy an unjust past) see in it a praise of feudalism and an insinuation that nothing has changed.

The root of the misunderstanding becomes evident in a theatrical presentation that Antonioni shoots at the end of his documentary: smiling Chinese athletes, dressed in vivid colors, guns slung on their shoulders, make their way up tall poles with acrobatic energy. This is Revolutionary China, which presents a strong picture of itself. But Antonioni's film presents a tender, docile picture. For us, gentleness is opposed to neurotic competition, but for the Chinese that docility decodes as resignation. Antonioni explores with realistic gusto the faces of the old and of children, but Chinese revolutionary art is not realistic, it is symbolic, and presents, in posters as in film, an "ideal type" that goes beyond ethnic characteristics (as if Sicilians decided, and with good reason, to represent themselves only through the faces of Sicilians of Norman ancestry, blond and blue-eyed). And doesn't it occur to us Italians to feel betrayed when a foreign film depicts us with the faces of Southern immigrants or Sardinian shepherds in costume, while we tend to identify our country with freeways and factories? The narration states (and it is a positive thing in our eyes) that the Chinese surround suffering and sentiment with shame and reserve. And a culture that rewards dynamism, enthusiasm, and extraverted competitiveness reads "reserve" as "hypocrisy." Antonioni thinks about the individual dimension and speaks of suffering as an uneliminable constant in the life of every person, tied to passion and death; the Chinese read "suffering" as a social ill and see in it the insinuation that injustice has not been eliminated, but rather covered up.

Thus we see how the by now famous criticism in *Renmin Ribao* could consider the shot of the Nanking bridge as an attempt to make it appear distorted and unstable, because a culture which prizes frontal representation and symmetrical distance shots cannot accept the language of western cinema which, to suggest impressiveness, foregrounds and frames from below, prizing dissymetry and tension over balance. And the shot of Peking's Tein An Men Square is seen as the denunciation of swarming mass disorder, while for Antonioni such a shot is the picture of life, and an ordered shot would be the picture of death, or would evoke the Nuremberg stadium.

Antonioni shows the vestiges of feudal superstition, and then immediately afterwards he shows students returning to work in the fields, spades slung over their shoulders, and the post-'68 viewer thinks that that is justice: the Chinese critic sees another logic (today, too, students work hard in the fields as they did in the past) and become indignant. Also, cutting is a language, and this language is historical, linked to different material conditions of life; the same shots portray different things and different persons. The same thing happens with colors, denounced by the Chinese as unbearably pale and cold, and rightly so, if you compare a film like *Red Detachment of Women*, where extremely bright colors acquire a precise linguistic value and directly symbolize ideological positions.

I could go on at length, and point out that the dialogue between peoples (and between persons of the same class who live in different cultures) must be sustained by a historical and social conscience of cultural differences. We must not blame Antonioni for this, since he made a film for the Western public, but perhaps he might have realized that the film could not remain a work of art and would immediately acquire the weight of a diplomatic note—in which every word is fraught with ambivalence. But the consultants of People's China should have realized it too, since they showed Antonioni the places and the things to film, insisting on the peaceful aspects of their society, and it took a year for them to be denounced by other critics who in their turn are now displaying remarkable ethnocentrism and showing themselves

incapable of seeing the different effects that the film can have within and outside China.

But perhaps the greatest responsibility rests with the Italy-China Association, whose task is precisely that of mediating these misunderstandings, supporting on more than one level of "translation from culture to culture" the cause of understanding among peoples: in transferring the Chinese protest bodily into Italy it acts objectively as a factor of misunderstanding, it widens the gap, and foments a reactionary game (which enlists willing ministers, prefects, police superintendents, and old-school diplomats for whom it is valuable that the Chinese remain yellow, treacherous, mysterious, and pig-tailed).

Finally, if useful mediation had been undertaken, then we would have been able to clarify the grossest misunderstandings. For example, the notorious scene of the pigs over which—for pure reasons of sound mix—a musical fragment is inserted. Unfortunately this fragment happened to be more or less the equivalent of our *Fratelli d'Italia*, evoking in the Chinese viewer the same reaction that a bishop might experience seeing a clinch accompanied by the hymn *Tantum Ergo*. But at the moviola, it seems, there was a consultant from People's China who realized nothing and told no one about the blunder. And then there is the fact that the narration, trying to be dry and objective, leaves too much room to isolated words, which thus acquire a disproportionate value: when it is said that a certain restaurant (rather modest from the outside) is the best in the city, probably it was meant that it served the best food, but the viewer could infer that there are no more imposing restaurants. And when a historical truth is related, such as the fact that modern Shanghai was built urbanistically by colonial powers, a handbill distributed in Italy explains (to tell the truth, without justification) that industrial Shanghai was built by People's China "with the help of the imperialists." All these are nuances which Antonioni could have easily avoided if only someone had brought them to his attention. But by now the situation has deteriorated beyond repair.

Now Chinese and Sinophiles have become rigid in their rejection. Antonioni has closed himself up again in his personal sorrow of the-artist-in-good-

faith and accepts only with difficulty the idea that from now on the debate will go far beyond his film and will involve on both sides—apart from political questions which elude us—unexorcised phantoms of ethnocentric dogmatism and aesthetic exoticism, and symbolic superstructures which obscure material relations and delay the course of history. The Venice Biennial Exposition pointed out a way, reopened critical discussion. We hope that this will not be in vain.

Already last Saturday evening, after the showing, a more open debate was in the air, beyond

the scandal-mongering. And to illustrate that fact, journalists' eyes were fixed on Antonioni and the young Chinese critic, who, at two in the morning, around a restaurant table, were polemically exchanging ideas and impressions. And in the corner, ignored by everyone, a young woman with soft, sensual eyes was following the discussion, accepting the fact that more important considerations were in play and that the protagonist of the evening was the Chinese. Her name was Maria Schneider, but few would have recognized her.

(Translated by Christine Leefeldt)

BRUCE F. KAWIN

A Faulkner Filmography

In the course of researching my book *Faulkner on Film* (New York: Ungar, 1977), I discovered that much of the supposedly "hard" information on Faulkner's Hollywood career was inaccurate. The filmography that follows this introduction is, to the best of my knowledge, an accurate list of all the screenwriting Faulkner did between 1932 and 1954. There are at this point four major sources of information on Faulkner's film career: George Sidney's Ph.D. thesis, "Faulkner in Hollywood" (University of New Mexico, 1959); Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974); James B. Meriwether's *The Literary Career of William Faulkner* (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1961); and Tom Dardis's recent overview of the Hollywood experiences of Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Huxley, West, and Agee, *Some Time in the Sun* (New York: Scribners, 1976).^{*} Each of these has its virtues and its errors. Meriwether gives several release dates that are as much as a month later than the *New York Times* reviews of those films; Blotner (on the whole the most authoritative source) has Faulkner working on Renoir's *The Southerner* two months after that

film was released; Sidney (who did the first and most cinematically well-informed study) sometimes mistakes final shooting scripts for the temporary drafts on which Faulkner himself worked, with the result that his chronology is often unreliable; and Dardis relies heavily on Blotner and Sidney for his information, supplementing their data with useful interviews but failing to address inconsistencies. All of their lists are short, and none could be properly termed a filmography.

Dardis's book has been receiving a lot of attention from reviewers who have not taken the time to check out his research. As a typical instance of the unreliability of *Some Time in the Sun*, consider the death-scene of Captain Quincannon that Faulkner wrote for Hawks's *Air Force* (and which, Hawks told me, was filmed word-for-word as Faulkner wrote it, and which is both more effective and less "symbolic" than Dudley Nichols's original version [on file at the UCLA Library]). The scene is not mentioned at all by Sidney;

^{*}Regina Fadiman also has a study forthcoming on *Intruder in the Dust*.